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ABSTRACT

An informal study examined the sources of professors' authority and whether the authority dynamic between professor and student changes in an electronic setting. Five on-line writing instructors (who use Internet Email or the World Wide Web) completed a questionnaire. Results indicated that (1) professors tended, at least initially, to replicate their classroom style when they instructed on-line; (2) as the volume of email between and among students and instructor increases, so does the informality of the exchanges; (3) the use of "emoticons" and acronyms contribute to the informality of email; (4) students tend to interpret on-line criticisms of their work more harshly than remarks made orally or on paper; (5) on-line instruction may enable students and professors to become better acquainted because of the opportunity for more, not less, communication; (6) the quality of students and instructors' communication may be higher in the on-line setting; and (7) the overtly dialogic aspect of on-line instruction causes professors to respond in readerly, rather than teacherly, ways. Areas of further inquiry include how the discipline being taught may influence the professor/student authority dynamic; whether classroom teaching style or years of teaching experience affect on-line instructional strategies; and what the students think about authority and other issues in on-line instruction. (Contains 11 references.) (RS)

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AUTHORITY ISSUES IN ON-LINE INSTRUCTION

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Authority Issues in On-line Instruction

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> Language is a system of shared social relations, and communication imbricates us in those relations. Given then that medium does affect meaning and that discursive acts call us into subject positions, researchers must consider the meanings and subjectivities invoked by electronic publishing. If, as researchers, we view electronic writing simply as an efficient and neutral vehicle for the transmission of content, then we have not control over the ways it may victimize or empower us (Howard 6).
>
> In theory, at least electronic environments potentially offer a free flow of information and ideas from all to all. (Kaplan 21).

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An anecdote:

"Hey! JoAnne"

It is noon on Friday. I am walking through the crowded lobby of a downtown office building when I hear my name shouted. It is my on-line writing student, waving enthusiastically over the heads of other walkers.

"Have a good weekend, Carol," I shout back. "You, too," comes the quick reply, as we stride toward our respective exits.

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This fleeting exchange became my motivation to explore in greater detail instructor-student authority issues in on-line instruction, specifically when that instruction takes place via Internet Email or the World Wide Web. It occurred to me that I knew an

awful lot about this particular student, her family, and her recent good times as well as past difficulties. I knew that her current job was a promotion, and that a few college courses (which she took after being, basically, goaded into it by a co-worker) whetted her appetite for a four-year degree, one she will earn approximately thirty years after her high school graduation.

She also knew a great deal about me. She was quite comfortable hailing me in the middle of a crowd--by my first name, no less, although such informality does not, in general, exist between students and professors at the institution at which I was then teaching.

Although small and student-centered, the college offers only business degrees, and perhaps because of the conservative image that business programs connote, classrooms tended to be formal. Nevertheless, I knew my students fairly well, perhaps more so than average since I usually taught composition, in which a good deal of their writing was based on personal experience. But it seemed to me that I got to know my on-line students even better.

My curiosity piqued, I began to consider seriously and to research issues such as the following: From what sources does our authority as professors tend to derive? How do those sources change in an electronic setting? How do the students' contexts--social, educational, and personal--influence the authority relationship on-line as opposed to within the classroom? And finally, does the authority dynamic between professor and student change by design or of necessity as one leaves the traditional classroom? If the latter, what are the implications for professors contemplating on-line instruction?

To attempt to construct answers to these questions, I drew from my own (limited)

experience as on-line instructor (and Internet junkie); from the (more substantial) experience of colleagues who regularly teach on-line, five of whom completed a brief questionnaire; and from published sources, both on-line and conventional. Not unexpectedly, I found both areas of consensus and wide divergence of opinion and experience. The instructors whom I surveyed, as well as myself, taught courses largely through Internet Email, and only a few provided opportunities for synchronous communication.

I began my research with some basic assumptions. Believing that ". . . authority, like voice, is situational and constructed" (Maher, 160), I felt sure that the context of the Internet and Email would affect professor/student dynamics. My sense, too, was that the Internet might provide a vehicle for the "power-sharing critical pedagogy" Ira Shor says is "a process for restructuring authority, teaching, and learning" (147).

Certainly, electronic mail already has a reputation for potential egalitarianism that is inherent in the medium. After all, visual and other nonverbal cues as to the gender, race, class of the communicators are completely absent (let us disregard for the moment personal web pages with photos of the pages owner and other graphics). Thus possible nonverbal sources of our authority as professors become non-existent or minimized. We do not, on-line, move into the *power* space at the front of the classroom or, for that matter, sit beside our students. Our students cannot see that we may wear ornamentation appropriate to our role as conservative professor or hipster scholar/mentor or any other identity we may choose to construct. Wherever our classroom environment appears on a scale of authoritarian to democratic, we cannot so easily use nonverbal factors to create it virtually.

One of my respondents is Suzanne, who has been teaching full-time for several years and on-line for two, and her experience reinforces my belief that informality is the Email default. She notes that her on-line students "tend to act more friendly towards me. There isn't that same teacher/student barrier that often exists when you stand in front of a classroom." She considers herself "more of a tutor, mentor, or editor," as does Tim, another respondent, who is new to on-line instruction and who found that the flexibility of Internet Email allows him to personalize instruction to a much greater extent than in conventional classes. In responding to his students' messages, he can provide "many individual responses to questions/comments by individual students." This personalization, he feels, can lead to greater informality in his relations with his on-line students. Joan C. Tornow echoes Suzanne and Tim's experiences when she cites the example of a student who always addressed the instructor on a first-name basis when communicating on-line but never did when face to face (54).

Within the conventional classroom setting, should we desire to exercise it, we have a degree of control that reinforces our authority: we may decide who speaks, for example, and for how long; we may establish the parameters of acceptable debate and discussion, as well as the topics for each session. The boundaries of time and space, set well in advance and memorialized in the schedule booklet, also apply. Thus the class meets in a particular room at a particular day and time; in general, we uphold those boundaries. We begin and end class, and doing so *on time* is generally held to be a virtue--in any case, certainly part and parcel of our authority is the right to officiate at the opening and closing of each class.

As we move into electronic settings, the various material qualities of our

interactions with students, many of which combine to become seats of our authority as professors, disintegrate, with predictably major implications for those who contemplate on-line instruction. Tornow goes so far as to say that on-line instruction is "not for the faint of heart," noting that "In computer-network discussions, the teacher no longer mediates the conversation by calling on students and responding to their comments with a direct or indirect evaluation. He or she no longer controls the conversation" (54). And Michael Joyce comments, in referring to a networked class in American literature, "The learners truly take their place as co-equals in an interpretive community" (121).

What occurs, in effect, is that we are left with limited sources of authority. Our position as professors and our expertise in our discipline may convey credibility and authority. Although these may not disappear completely with the translation to a new medium, instructors may find that on-line they more quickly embrace the "tutor, mentor, editor" roles to which Suzanne refers. Joyce uses the term "multi-disciplinary specialist" (121) to convey the new, mult-faceted roles of the instructor who collaborates with her students rather than being the "head" of the class.

Verbal cues--the ways in which we use language, our diction, syntax, and other conventions of usage--may provide another, also limited source of authority for the on-line instructor as coach rather than player. However, I would suggest that the electronic context tends to mitigate professorial authority and that faculty contemplating teaching on-line may find their perspectives on their roles challenged in ways they may not expect. Patrick, a veteran in the conventional classroom, and an on-line professor for two years, comments as follows on the influence of the Internet, where all Web sites are created equal: ". . . with the Internet as a metaphor for the class (no single cite being more

important than another), the teacher with the more authoritarian approach may find him or herself swimming up the perceptual stream."

In fact, putting aside for the moment serious questions of access (such as those discussed by Ray, Barton, and Gomez in Hawisher and Selfe, 1991), we can likely all agree that the Internet *is* potentially inclusive and egalitarian. Louis J. Perelman asserts that the essence of the Net may lead to "the empowerment of human minds to learn spontaneously, without coercion, both independently and cooperatively" (23). This view of a democratic electronic community, as James Strickland notes, has been present from the beginning: "In the best of all possible worlds, the teacher will be just one more writer on the network, a network linking voices across the room and across the country. This was the vision of the original hackers who began the computer revolution—a global village a la Marshall McLuhan/Buckminister Fuller" (Strickland, James).

A recent TV commercial for an Internet Service Provider made the same point, using a montage of images--of the young, old, black, white, differently abled--in support of the claim that socio-economic factors disappear as users log on. Faculty planning to teach on-line may need to bear in mind this natural inclination toward democracy.

At this point I will add that my survey suggests, not surprisingly, that professors tend, at least initially, to replicate their classroom style when they instruct on-line. Students themselves may react differently. For instance, Ed, an experienced instructor who has taught Internet courses an impressive eight years, feels that his on-line students generally approach him more cautiously at first than they do in his conventional classrooms, seeing him as the disembodied voice of expert knowledge, with built-in authority--what Patrick calls the "Wizard of Oz factor." Patrick goes on to say that

"students conditioned to think of teachers as authority figures tend to react fairly formally until the teacher reveals his or her personality." Ed, Patrick, and Suzanne are all in agreement that as the volume of Email between and among students and instructor increases, so does the informality of the exchanges, and my own experience bears this out.

Another respondent, however, has a slightly different perspective. Donna's experience over two years of on-line instruction and compared to many years of classroom teaching, leads her to believe that "whatever approach an individual student would be using in the classroom will carry over pretty much directly to the on-line course." Similarly, she feels her own approach to instruction does not vary significantly as she moves from the physical to the virtual situation. If anything, she notes, "I could make a case that I feel more *in control* on-line because I don't have to deal with the live, in-person presence of a roomful of people. There are actually fewer opportunities for the public challenge I think most teachers dread. If a student has an issue during an on-line course, it is much more likely to be handled privately."

Questions of personal teaching style or philosophy aside, electronic mail from its inception has not been a formal medium--quite the reverse is true. Talk to veteran Net users, in fact, and you may very likely hear a lament for the days before the Invasion of the Newbies--the frontier days when line editors and prohibitive on-line composing costs made revision anathema and questions of grammar, usage, and style moot. You simply typed out what you wanted to say--quickly. Whatever typographical errors were made stayed put, and format receded to make way for the gist of meaning you hoped would make it through. Today's Internet, these same users aver, is *much too formal*.

For most of us Joanie or Johnny-come-latelys, Email tends to be supremely informal, and it may be harder than we might suspect to maintain the same level of formality of discourse that is customary in a classroom setting. Moreover, in addition to what might be called an ethos of egalitarianism, consider as well the various graphic conventions that have sprung up, all of which seem to me to contribute further to the essential informality of the Net.

Emoticons are everywhere. The ubiquitous smiley face of the 70s, which perhaps should have been consigned to the same oblivion as other, equally forgettable products of that decade (including every popular song, with no exceptions!), instead has exploded into the major substitute for the nonverbal nuances of interpersonal communication. Its variations appear infinite, to the point that *dictionaries* of smileys, now given the more dignified appellation, *emoticon*, are essential: how else to tell whether the sender is happy, sly, lipstick-wearing, or a Klingon? The use of emoticons may give an additional layer of feeling to verbal language, but it surely does not provide an additional layer of formality.

Acronyms, perhaps a throwback to days when writing messages as quickly as possible was a primary virtue, and perhaps a nod to the preferences of the engineers who designed the Net (I think of the engineering majors I knew as an undergraduate and their propensity to label crises as FUBAR), likewise contribute to informality of usage. They are essential components of Net communication; they are impossible to avoid, and they form an essential core of knowledge for all Net users. Sometimes they also substitute for the lack of visual and other cues, as for instance, LOL (laughing out loud). In any case they become habitual. If students are serious Net cruisers, their inclination will be to

continue to use them, and it may be that it is more difficult to cling to professorial authority when receiving and sending messages filled with ☺ or ☹, or a variation thereof.

Among the more carefree and whimsical aspects of Email, however, there may also lurk the potential for miscommunication. Readers may interpret the tone of Email texts in ways writers do not intend to a greater extent than occurs when texts are created non-electronically. Over and over again I have heard students—and colleagues in communication with each other—comment that they have received harsh-sounding or hostile messages that, following further dialogue with the senders, needed re-interpretation. Such a tendency may also affect professor-student authority issues.

Nearly all of my respondents point out that they have found that students tend to interpret on-line criticisms of their work more harshly than similar remarks made either orally or on paper. Suzanne comments, ". . . I never really intended my tone to be sarcastic or harsh, but some students read it that way at times," while Ed explicitly cautions, "I find strict approaches in comments and criticism are taken too seriously by students on-line. I purposefully try to temper my criticisms of papers, etc., for this reason."

On the one hand, students may be responding more sensitively to the "expert's" judgment; on the other, they may also respond with what they believe to be in-kind aggressiveness, depending on their sense of their own authority and, perhaps, on their experience with the Internet, where *flaming* (sending hostile, offensive, or otherwise harassing messages) is relatively common. There was some agreement among my colleagues and myself that students' on-line voices frequently seemed strident and aggressive—particularly when they Emailed inquiries demanding rationales for grades on

assignments. Most of us agreed that these requests, though private rather than public, were generally higher profile challenges than occur in conventional classrooms. Tornow's research supports our experiences: "In this environment, students may readily dispense with the conventional stance of acquiescent and docile student." (101)

In any case, whether on the professor's or on the student's part, misunderstanding can easily result. Adding a smiley to make attempts at humor more overt may help. Being aware of the potential for misinterpretation likely does as well.

As suggested above, students who are cyber-nuts will approach the medium—including the on-line course—with a good deal of confidence as well as enthusiasm and will have built-in expectations for the medium and their roles within it. I would suggest that this feeling of authority may carry over into their assignments and their other communications with their professors and peers alike.

Having said this, I will add that depending on course requirements, students' assignments may be turned in using formats as formal as would be expected in a conventionally taught course—no ☺ appears in their research papers! I refer here more to the nature of the ongoing conversations between and among professor and students--the back and forth commentary in which an instructor or peer may query their texts, answer their questions, respond to their concerns, note their progress, and so forth.

As noted earlier, my sense, and that of my colleagues generally, is that on-line instruction may enable students and professors to become better acquainted simply by virtue of the fact that more, not less, opportunity for communication exists. Students seem inclined to do more work in on-line settings. The pressure is to perform, if for no other reason than it is glaringly obvious if no work is done. The situation in this way is

far different than it is for students sitting in the back of the room hoping not to be called on to comment on work they haven't done or texts they haven't read.

How might greater informality of content and style affect the *quality* of students' work? In my experience, and those of my respondents generally, the quality of students—and instructors'—communication may actually be higher. Both Tim and Patrick, for instance, point out that because they respond to their students at their own pace at times convenient to them, they can do so in a more measured way, giving rise, perhaps, to more thoughtful remarks. Tim has found that the quality of his on-line students' work remains as high, or higher, than that produced in class: "I do seem to get more probing questions and comments on line from many of the students. . . . Questions lead to interesting discussions between student and faculty. Some of the thinking on the part of the students has been very high level." I would suggest that more capable performances by students may encourage instructors to grant more authority to them.

On-line students are also likely to accompany their assignments with notes introducing the work, perhaps explaining why they have proceeded in a certain direction, or asking whether they are on the right track. In this way a dialogue--the ongoing conversation to which I alluded above--begins and is sustained, and I contend that a less hierarchical professor-student relationship may result than is the case in many conventional classes. As Ed explains, ". . . the students and I develop a closer, more personal relationship through Email and chats. Many more on-line students contact me personally for advice . . . . I maintain relationships with students on-line far longer than in traditional teaching. . . . We all frequently share personal updates, ideas, jokes, etc. by Email and through on-line chat. Many students from past classes also visit my tutorial

labs, etc., just to check in or to have me give an opinion on their papers or articles."

I would also contend that the overtly dialogic aspect of on-line instruction causes professors to respond in readerly, rather than teacherly, ways. When I receive my students' Email messages, there is something about going into my mailbox and opening the file that keeps the sender--my student-- foremost in my mind; I am exceedingly aware that my student is speaking to me, in a very immediate sort of way, much more so than I do when I read text on paper. I read on-line texts much more as a reader, automatically reading for larger issues and meanings, with much less tendency to pause at typographical or other word- or sentence-level errors. For me, reading in this way lends more authority to the student texts. I feel that I read them, in a way, more seriously and differently from other texts. I feel very keenly what Joyce means when he says, referring to on-line instruction, "We face a new world when we teach <there>" (126).

The informal survey I have conducted raises more issues and opens areas for further inquiry. How, for example, may the discipline being taught influence the professor-student authority dynamic? Does classroom teaching style, or years of teaching experience, affect on-line instructional strategies? What about the type of software or hardware being used? Equally important, what are *our students'* perceptions of authority and other issues in on-line instruction? Informal student responses I have seen at two institutions during the past few years are overwhelmingly positive. Negative reactions have been limited to technical difficulties with software or hardware (or both) and complaints that not enough on-line courses are being offered. Given that all of the students taught by my respondents elected to take on-line courses, such positive response is perhaps unsurprising, but further interrogation may be interesting and useful.

For example, earlier I have speculated that students' sense of authority may reflect their confidence as experienced Net surfers. But what of those students who have no such level of competence? Lynn Sykes and Nancy Uber's 1995 study has already found anecdotal evidence that novice users may indeed feel *disempowered* in electronic settings (ERIC, ED 388 984), and this area may be another fruitful research path.

In terms of speculation as to the future of Internet courses, Patrick's comments are perhaps the most intriguing:

> "It will also be interesting to see how both the students' and teachers' attitudes change as we all become more sophisticated users of Email, the Internet, etc. I think most of my students, both on-line and in class tend to think of Email as a faster form of standard mail and they use the Internet passively as a kind of sexy encyclopedia. . . . I wonder what will happen when we see an entire generation of students who have spent their lives using these electronic wonders interactively—participating in Newsgroups, Usegroups, perhaps having put their own web pages on the Internet—in short, people used to the radically democratic, unhierarchical model that the Internet represents. Will they then take that model into the electronic classroom? Will they tend to think of the teacher as just one more node, perhaps one with a pretty clever webmaster, but just one more nonetheless?"

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